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ABSTRACT

Commodification is one of the media mechanisms that shape and proliferate images of femininity which result in the disempowerment of women and of female athletes. The method of homology is used to analyze commodification, one of the formal structures or mechanisms of patriarchy. After a description of this mechanism, the discussion focuses on how the mechanism is enstructured in the medium of sports magazines and particularly, how it is exemplified in the March 1992 "Sports Illustrated" swimsuit issue. The focus of the discussion on the swimsuit issue is on the techniques, graphic and textual, used to present the female models as commodities. The women in this issue of the magazine are not shown as capable atheletes but as commodities that can be purchased and whose primary function is to give pleasure to male readers. Finally, commodification is examined within the historical and cultural contexts of the last 15 years to show how it is linked to political events in contemporary North American society, particularly to the advancement of women into the traditionally male-dominated world of sports. Commodification is considered as a technique or mechanism for reducing the threat of parity in the sporting arena. (IAH)

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Beyond Stereotyping: An Understanding of Sport Media As Sites of Struggle

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In the last decade, sport scholars have been increasingly interested in studying sport media texts for their meanings, particularly meanings that relate to gender and gender stereotypes (Bryant, 1980; Duncan, 1986; Duncan, 1990; Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Duncan, Messner, & Williams; 1990 Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990; Duquin, 1989; Hilliard, 1984; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Rintala & Birrell, 1984; Theberge, 1991). In virtually all cases, these scholars have indicted the particular magazines, newspapers, or television networks for presenting images of women in ways that sexualize and objectify female athletes and that trivialize their sporting accomplishments.

But studies that focus on images in isolation from social structures and institutions--even if they discuss the underlying patriarchal ideologies--cannot reveal systems or underlying structures. They can only show particular manifestations of sexism. At this level, strategies for deep or systematic intervention do not become apparent.

Theory

Feminist scholar Susan Bordo (1989) articulates an alternative understanding of power as embodied in structures. Drawing on Foucault's work, she argues

> We must . . . abandon the idea of power as something possessed by one group and leveled against another, and we must think instead of the network of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance within a particular domain . . . Particularly in the realm of femininity, where so much depends upon the seemingly willing acceptance of various norms and practices, we need an analysis

> of the power from "from below," as Foucault puts it, for example, the mechanisms that shape and proliferate, rather than repress . . . our energies, construct our conceptions of normalcy and deviance. (1989, p. 15)

Note that Bordo points to mechanisms (or structures) rather than particular texts. A focus on isolated portrayals of women's sports and female athletes allows us only to identify those particular features that invite stereotyped or sexist readings. However, a focus on the mechanisms and structures of patriarchal ideology provides us with the knowledge we need to successfully intervene. If we adopt the kind of approach advocated by Bordo, the crucial question for sport media scholars may be posed this way: What are the media mechanisms that result in the disempowerment of women and female athletes as they shape and proliferate images of femininity?

Method

What kind of approach would allow us to identify the institutional and structural mechanisms that shape and proliferate patriarchal images? Several writers have suggested an investigation of form--the formal patterns or structures underlying texts. Form is immanent in many different texts, and in all the experiences of a medium. Therefore, form or pattern exists at the structural level where ideology, such as patriarchy, is strongest.

What method allows us to discern the formal structures of a medium? One promising method is homology or "the formal linkage underlying, structuring, and unifying" an ideological construct (Brummett, 1991, p.

111). Communication scholar Barry Brummett has used the method of homology to understand how form operates as a mechanism that shapes and proliferates ideology. Brummett has focused on the formal structures underlying media texts. He argues that in mediated texts, "content, medium, and context are continuous . . . [share common themes] largely at the formal level" (p. 111, 1991). Furthermore, he believes that form appeals to audiences at a more basic level than do particular texts: "form is more fundamental and creates a wider range of linkages [to people's experiences] than does explicit content" (p. 110, 1991).

Using the method of homology, I will discuss one of the formal structures or mechanisms of patriarchy: commodification. After describing this mechanism I shall then show how it is enstructured in (homologous with) the medium of sport magazines and how it is exemplified in the March 1992 Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue. Finally, I shall embed the mechanism of commodification in the historical and cultural contexts of the last decade and a half to show how it is linked to political events in contemporary North American society.

I. Commodification

As Baudrillard (1970, 1983a, 1983b) and numerous other contemporary scholars (Bourdieu, 1984; Douglas & Isherwood, 1980; Jameson, 1979; and others) have asserted, consumption is a pervasive and significant mode of capitalist industrial society. We live in a consumer culture, one that encourages rapid gratification of desires and is therefore characterized by the growth of commodity production whose consequence is an immense output of material culture: both material goods and symbolic goods. Our pleasure in these goods issues from both physical consumption--for

example, the actual drinking of a bottle of wine--and from symbolic consumption--deriving satisfaction from the sign: talking about, collecting, and gazing at fine vintages. In short, in our postmodern North American society, our relations to objects and to people are shaped by our patterns of consumption, our use of particular commodities. The ideological engine of commodification works by commodifying everything in sight: by turning experiences, signs, and even people into formal commodities, commodity-like things. That process of commodification is revealed in the homology of formal similarity between the medium and the content of magazines.

Magazines

How is commodification manifested in magazines? As commodities, magazines may be purchased at the newsstand or by subscription by anyone who has sufficient resources. Magazines are very accessible commodities, since they tend to be relatively cheap and they require no expensive or unwieldy equipment (unlike, for example, videotapes, which are more costly and which require a VCR and monitor). Once the magazine has been purchased, the buyer symbolically consumes the images and words. In this sense the buyer possesses a kind of power over those images and words. The buyer may look at the pictures and read the pages at will. Magazine photographs are particularly susceptible to consumption. Unlike words, photographs do not require literacy or other special skills. Furthermore, the photographs may be cut out and displayed for the pleasure of the viewer, and may be easily transposed to various contexts, e.g., the office, home, and friends' houses.

The commodity status of the magazine is homologous with the

commodification of women as they are represented on the pages of the 1992 Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue. This is true on several different levels.

Content

Models, Not Athletes

First, the primary subjects of the swimsuit issue are not female athletes, as one might expect from a sport magazine, but rather an elite cadre of models who are highly paid to grace the pages of SI. Most readers are aware of this fact, and expect to see the faces and bodies of women like Kathy Ireland, Naomi Campbell, Paulina Porizkova, and others who command the top salaries in the fashion photography industry. Thus, the models themselves are commodities, bought by the producers of the SI swimsuit issue.

But there is another sense in which these models are commodities, in this case commodities for the buyers. The models' beautiful faces and bodies are on display for the consumer. They are posed invitingly with their breasts and bottoms thrust out provocatively. The suits they model are often the briefest of bikinis, which reveal a titillating expanse of flesh in the truest Playboy tradition. Smiling seductively at the reader these models seem to say, "Look at me; gaze at my beautiful face and body; I am here for your pleasure."

The implicit suggestion is that those who have sufficient resources may purchase these women themselves, own them, and exercise power over them, just as one purchases a magazine, owns it, and can exercise power over it. By carrying the magazine around, by cutting out the pictures and

pasting them on the wall, the reader does in some sense own the women--if not their actual flesh-and-blood bodies, at least their photographic images, the next best thing. This is the stuff fantasies are made of, and that reason alone may account for the magazine's extraordinary popularity.

This homology between women and commodification is reiterated in several textual practices, in particular in the photographs' captions. First, the captions always state the price of the swimsuits, which range from $38 to $660, with most falling in the upper range. So the reader is continually reminded that the suit is for sale (much like the model). And to take this line of reasoning to its logical extreme, perhaps if a reader purchases such a suit for one's lover or oneself, that person will look like the model on the page. This is the lure of commodity capitalism: the desiring self buys happiness via commodities.

Second, the captions always identify the models by name. The first photo of a particular model includes the model's first name and last names; all succeeding photos refer to the model by her first name only, establishing a kind of intimacy between the viewer and the woman. As Henley's research (1987) points out, "dominants" often feel free to refer to "subordinates" by their first names. So the person who is calling the other by the first name has the presumption and control. Readers who are on a first-name basis with Kathy, Vendela, Judit, Naomi, and Roshumba exercise a kind of symbolic power over the models. The models are thus rendered more accessible to the readers, who can fantasize that they may themselves possess these beautiful women, much as one may purchase and possess a valuable commodity.

The following caption most explicitly links the model to her commodity status: "In a thong ($49) and coverup ($98) by Randolph Duke, Vendela's

net worth is ample, even with nothing in her pockets" (p. 91). (Here the photo shows the model exposing her "net worth," her beautiful body and face, which are obviously "for sale" and may be possessed by purchasing the magazine.)

Olympic Commodification

The homology between women and commodities is evident on another level, although in a less explicit way. This occurs in the recurring motif of the 1992 Olympic Games. We read at the beginning of the swimsuit display (pp. 82-83) that the site of this photo shoot is Spain because that is where the Olympic Games will take place in the summer of 1992. Although ostensibly an amateur competition in some ways, the Olympics also vividly illustrate the incursion of commodification into the sport realm. Olympic athletes typically receive financial support (sponsorship) from corporations in exchange for advertising their products (i.e., wearing their athletic shoes or spandex suits, publically endorsing their products). Furthermore, the Olympic Games are big business in other ways; they represent a major source of revenue for the city that hosts the games and for the television networks.

How is the link made between Olympic commodification and the featured highly paid models, who are clearly not Olympic athletes? The homology is revealed via cleverly worked captions and Olympic theme visuals, so that the reader associates the faces of Kathy Ireland, Paulina Porizkova, and Naomi Campbell with Olympic sport and, by implication, its commodification. For example we read, "Paulina Porizkova presages an Olympic gold rush in a suit by Robert Mannino ($95)" (p. 84), "With Olympic mettle, Kathy Ireland legs it out and goes for the gold: A

glittering Lycra suit by Monika Tilley Swim ($165)" (p. 87), "In the company of Olympic mascot Cobi, Roshumba Williams gives Montjuic Olympic Stadium in Barcelona a sneak preview of red-white-and-blue for 92; her star-spangled suit is from TYR Sport ($50)" (p. 82), and "There's no question, though, that Naomi emerges a winner in satin-finish Lycra by Giorgio di Sant'Angelo ($660)" (p. 108).

Performances and Exhibitions

Another homology relates commodification to women's performances/exhibitions. This theme suggests athletic performances, as in Olympic performances, but it also hints at other kinds of exhibitions that are put on expressly for the pleasure of the viewer or spectator. Clearly these photos of shapely, beautiful women adorn the sports pages for this very reason: to please the readership--which is composed largely of middle-class heterosexual males (Bowdren, 1988)--and to insure that they will buy or subscribe to the magazine. The captions suggest this type of exhibition as well. So, for example, in the picture of a model reclining by the pool, positioned in her low cut, "USA" embroidered suit so as to show her ample cleavage, the caption reads "Stacey Williams exhibits poolside patriotism during an afternoon siesta on the island of Mallorca. Her suit is from La Blanca ($57)" (pp. 104-105). (The implicit suggestion is that patriotism consists at least partly of exposing maximum flesh for the pleasure of the viewer.) An equally suggestive caption and photograph show a model positioned on the sand in a thong that reveals her buttocks: "Atop a windy dune on Grand Canary island, Vendela grins through a gritty performance in her bikini by Darling Rio ($38)" (pp. 114-115). In another photo, we read "Paulina exhibits star quality in her

bejeweled bikini by Gottex ($420)" (p. 117). The caption of a photo showing the same model in three different postures superimposed upon a background of vineyards exclaims, "a multiply exposed Ashley Montana is thrice as nice in a patent-and-nylon-spandex suit by Karla Colletto ($100)" (pp. 92-93). A two-page spread featuring a model wearing a suit dotted with the word "Oh" is captioned in a way to underline her function as a man-pleasing spectacle: "With all eyes on her Ohs, Judit navigates past the cafe crowd in Cadaqués in her exclamatory suit from Lisa Lomas ($90)" (pp. 96-97). In this photo, clusters of men (women are conspicuously absent) are seated at cafe tables, riveting their gaze on the model who is crossing the street. Thus, the women in the photographs are putting on performances and exhibitions, are exposing themselves sexually to the eyes of appreciative male viewers, who will pay for the right to oogle them by purchasing the magazine.

Precious Substances

The final homology between women and commodities is revealed on a very explicit level. Many of the suits in this issue are made out of golden fabrics or shimmering metallic materials, some glittering with holograms, sequins, or crystalline drops. As already mentioned, the "gold" relates to the Olympic gold motif. But precious metals like gold, as well as jewels and substances that glisten and shimmer also hint at costliness, wealth, and expense. Gold and other precious substances are traded on the commodities market.

Of the 30 fashion photos, fully half show models in golden or bejeweled swimsuits, visually conveying an impression of riches. The captions underline the visual theme of precious substances, for example,

the two already alluded to, "Paulina Porizkova presages an Olympic gold rush in a suit by Robert Mannino ($95)" (p. 84), and "With Olympic mettle, Kathy Ireland legs it out and goes for the gold: A glittering Lycra suit by Monika Tilley Swim ($165)" (p. 87). Notice the triple pun: Olympic mettle (as in skill), Olympic medal (the first, second, and third place awards), and Olympic metal (the substances of gold, silver, and bronze). In addition we read: "Paulina exhibits star quality in her bejeweled bikini by Gottex ($420)" (p. 117), "Vendela sparkles in a hologram studded suit from Lisa Lomas ($295)" (p. 95), "Kathy Ireland sparkles in a Giorgio di Sant'Angelo suit ($145) and diamond earrings by Tiffany" (p. 3), "Part shimmer, part shadow, Naomi lends her form to the substance of a lace bandeau top and Lycra thong by Monika Tilley Swim ($85)" (p. 100), "Naomi Campbell glows in the golden sunlight of Cadaqués and a golden suit by Gottex ($76)" (p. 90), "Paulina's morning suit is a lycra-and-crystal bikini from Giorgio di Sant-Angelo ($145)" (p. 107), and "[Roshumba's] dazzling desertwear--bikini ($96) and tights ($122) is from Gottex" (p. 110). This association of precious substances with the women on the pages of SI once again points up their commodity status. These very beautiful models are very valuable commodities.

Let us now turn to the historical/cultural context in which the mechanism of commodification is embedded. In the following section, I shall argue that the mechanism of commodification has formal links to the political events of the last 15 years. Those links represent ways in which the underlying formal structure does its work in the real world.

Historical and Cultural Contexts

The political climate for women during the last decade and a half has

been characterized as a time of backlash by several feminist writers (Faludi, 1991; Spitzack, 1990; Wolf, 1991). Statistics paint a grim portrait of women's economic hardships: 80% of full-time working women make less than $20,000, American women represent two thirds of all poor adults, they are twice as likely as men to receive no pensions, far more likely than men to live in bad housing and receive no health insurance, etc. (Faludi, 1991). Women are faring no better in other areas: women's reproductive rights are being increasingly jeopardized as the access to different forms of contraception has declined, and new laws limiting abortion and information about abortion have been passed (Faludi, 1991). In education three-fourths of all high schools still violate the federal law prohibiting sex discrimination, and women's sports programs receive far less funding than men's (Faludi, 1991).

According to Faludi (1991), Spitzack, (1990), and Wolf (1991), these setbacks are no accident; women's quest for equality poses a profound threat to men and is countered in ways that reduce women's power in many spheres: economic, educational, reproductive, etc. But there is one sphere in particular where women's progress is regarded as an egregious incursion into territory that "belongs" to men. This sphere, of course, is sport, which represents one of the last bastions of patriarchal masculinity (Birrell, 1988; Duncan, 1990; Kane & Snyder, 1989; Messner, 1988). Sport has long been an arena dominated by men, and it is one of the few spheres where males could continue to feel dominant and superior, up until quite recently. But women's increasing skill, power, and competence in the sporting arena pose a real challenge to the patriarchal myth of male superiority. Besides the physical challenges posed to patriarchy, there have also been political challenges, such as the passage

of Title IX.

One way of dealing with this perceived female threat is to present women in ways that undermine their strength and power, and to allow men to feel that they can control and contain the threat. The mechanism of commodification functions to disempower women and thereby contain the threat. Commodification operates to empower those who have purchasing power. In most cases, this means men.

At the level of magazines, women may be transformed into commodities that may be purchased and subjugated to the whims of their owners. Thus, men can symbolically exercise their dominance and power. They exercise this power not with real women, but with the sign or concept of Woman, which is commodified at the formal level.

This is precisely what we see on the pages of the SI swimsuit issue. Women in this issue are shown not as capable athletes, but as commodities whose primary function is to give pleasure to male readers. By offering male readers a bevy of beauties who are in no way real athletes, SI reduces the threat of parity in the sporting arena.

The SI swimsuit issue promotes the pursuit of the feminine ideal, a patriarchal ideal that mandates glamour, groomed beauty, facial and bodily perfection for women. The author of The Beauty Myth (1991), Naomi Wolf, argues, "'Beauty' is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West, it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact." (p. 12) Thus, beauty itself is a commodity, one that objectifies and disempowers. And according to patriarchal ideology becoming beautiful involves the consumption of numerous beauty products: make-up, nail polish, hair care preparations, and so on (Wolf, 1991; Spitzack, 1990;

Coward, 1985; Kuhn, 1985).

How does the pursuit of beauty keep male dominance intact? According to Wolf (1991), it encourages women to channel great quantities of energy and money into emulating a nearly impossible beauty standard. When women inevitably fail to measure up, those failures prey on their self-esteem, setting up debilitating cycles of self-hatred. Furthermore, the frantic pursuit of facial and bodily perfection depletes women of the resources which might otherwise be used to combat real political inequities.

Wolf argues that the beauty backlash is powerfully produced and reproduced via the photo features on the pages of the "glossies," expensively produced and beautifully photographed magazines featuring highly paid models. Nowhere is the beauty backlash more evident than in the SI swimsuit edition, which displays the faces and figures of some of the most beautiful models in the world.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to analyze the formal structure of commodification that gives rise to gender stereotypes and sexism in the media. If we wish to combat women's oppression, we must identify the institutions, technologies, and practices that produce and reproduce patriarchal ideology. I have located the ideology of patriarchy at this institutional level. Using the method of homology, I identified commodification as a mechanism that "shapes and proliferates" patriarchy, which is enstructured in the medium of magazines. Next I selected a particular sport text, the 1992 SI swimsuit issue, to show how this mechanism is manifested in the photographs and captions. My final step was to situate commodification in the historical and cultural contexts of the last decade and a half where political events manifest the underlying

formal structure of patriarchy.

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